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No HUD and Counting on the Paddles Upgrade!

By Lt. Joe Alden

Four months into our cruise, the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* and Air Wing 8 team found itself in the steamy Persian Gulf. After three months of combat in Kosovo and Serbia, we were anxious for our crack at Saddam.

Cyclic ops in the Arabian Gulf always have their share of gotchas: slipper seals that fail, aircraft that slide toward the scupper while turning onto cat 4, diverts into Al Jabbar to hang with the Air Force for a day. Everyone had a story of adventure or misadventure.

Starting at VFA-106, fledgling Hornet drivers practice making circus landings. Unfortunately, FCLPs in the Hornet are not challenging unless done in conjunction with circus approaches. Getting off to a good start and putting your velocity vector next to the lens is a snap and usually will get you one OK-wire after another. Even the circus approaches at the beach don't take on

the real-world feeling you get when they actually occur in the middle of some faraway ocean.

This flight wasn't supposed to be exciting, a 2 v 2 with the Toms next door, restricted to the E-2-defined bear cave. We flew the standard, cyclic-ops, max-endurance profiles during the runs, then knocked off to check in with marshal. After completing my fence checks, I noticed my heads up display (HUD) began to flicker before eventually kicking off-line. It had happened to me once before during RAG CQ on the JFK. Cycling the HUD on-off switch usually fixed the problem, but not this day.

Still a nugget, I did the smart thing and "fessed" up to my buddy on AUX. I jiggled the HUD, cycled it on and off, played with the intensity, tested it with BIT, but nothing worked. Now was the time to talk to the ultimate troubleshooter, the CATCC rep. He was our XO and could draw the schematics of the Hornet from memory.



Switching to button two to speak with a rep invites fellow aircrew to listen in. Being a new guy, that was in the back of my mind. With the ship between Farsi Island and Iran, there wasn't room for error. Being head down with my displays and going through an IBIT with a small AOB on the standby gyro halfway between mom and Farsi was inviting trouble. I couldn't bear it any more and stopped the BIT. I found myself two miles from the Farsi standoff range and headed directly for it. I went to mil power and pulled away just before nicking the airspace boundary. My equilibrium was whacked at this point. The next thing I thought of was the helicopter crew that flew over Farsi the week before. Upon their arrival, our battle group commander impounded their helicopter and grounded the crew. I had dodged that bullet.

Back to the rep: He asked if I felt comfortable bringing aboard an aircraft without a HUD. I

replied, "Yes." Why? Because I knew from experience that a degraded pass in the Hornet often brought a bonus, usually the OK or the upgrade from paddles. I told the rep I would do it.

Checking into marshal and setting up holding was easy with the HUD on my left DDI. After completing the HAIL checklist, I pushed on time and made my descent. I had bull's-eye and needles frequencies dialed in and received them 4.0. I had all the tools to get me the good start we are accustomed to. Needles showed me with the nice up-and-on, and bull's-eye had me the same. Setting the glide slope with the auto throttles eased the workload tremendously. Still, something in the back of my mind was reminding me of flying the ball in the simulator.

After setting the standard 720 fpm rate of descent, with auto throttles engaged, I clicked them off and began manhandling the throttles. My heart began to race. I was telling myself

those Tomcat and Prowler guys do it without a Gucci HUD like ours. I wasn't comfortable looking down at the left DDI for everything I needed to fly the approach. I was used to looking through the HUD. When I called the ball, I only saw meatball, lineup and AOA; no VSI. That is where an NFO would come in handy.

I got off to a great start with needles centered on the velocity vector. I transitioned to head-out-of-the-cockpit and added power to get the ball to crest. That didn't happen. The ball began to rise until it screamed to get off the top of the lens. I knew that it was getting ugly, but I remembered that according to our RAG paddles, no-HUD in the Hornet was an emergency. I bought a bolter bigger than anything.

I had plenty of fuel for several more cracks at it. It never crossed my mind to ask for a mode-one approach. That probably would have been too easy. I wouldn't even have had to deal with the problem, but I wanted to prove to myself I could get the OK 3-wire.

"Four Zero Four, airborne," I sadly called, as I made my ascent to angels one point two.

There were no lights anywhere, except for CVN 71 and her aircraft flying around. I knew what I'd done wrong. Hooking in around six miles, I dirtied up and referenced my DDI. Once again, I made it to a great start with a centered ball and blew it off the top.

"Power back on, bolter, bolter, bolter," was the call as I bought my second one.

My heart was beating out of my chest. Now I was thinking to myself that CAG and the skipper were biting their nails as the only lieutenant junior grade in the two Hornet squadrons was flailing around the gulf. Our ready-room bolt was surely hanging over my lonely seat, suspended from the ceiling by a steel-fishing leader. I came around for the third time and did the same thing. It was getting ugly. I had one pass left before I would either hit the tanker or head to Kuwait. Mustering what little brainpower I had left, I visualized what the pass should look like and went over it again and again on downwind. Getting to a good start was easy; it was flying the

ball that was slapping me around. This was it, I was coming aboard.

"Four Zero Four, on and on, three-quarters of a mile, call the ball," I said.

After the ball call, it was my turn to troll. I was coming aboard. So what did I do? I kept leading the low, breaking one of the five LSO rules-to-live-by. Well, I led the low all the way to the ace.

"Welcome aboard," was probably resounding around the ship. It was good to be home. Heading down to the ready room, I couldn't pick up my head. I had just flown four ugly passes in a row. I reassured myself that the Hornet-no-HUD emergency would get the bolters no-counted and the ace auto-no-grade brought up to at least a fair. When I saw the CAG paddles walk into our ready room, I could tell by his look that I was sadly mistaken. After all, he was a Prowler guy, and they do it all the time.

I took it in the face, but it was my own fault. By the way, that shiny bolt was hanging over my ready-room chair as expected. My Ops O showed me his own four-bolter entry in his log book from when he was a J.O. I learned even the best have had their night in the barrel. He had my three bolters and one no-grade beat but not by much.

Starting back in CQ, I should have done more no-HUD and other circus passes in the FCLP pattern. Thinking the no-HUD emergency would buy me the paddles upgrade was ludicrous. My concentration was about half of what it should have been. Thinking about the auto OK was the wrong thing to do. Almost flying over Farsi Island could have been avoided with better aviating and navigating. Trolling the low to get aboard could have been fatal.

What could I have done? Flying the ball to touchdown would have been nice for a start. Applying the LSO rules-to-live-by would have helped as well. Furthermore, this all could have been avoided with a mode-one approach. It was a learning experience and one that could be avoided in the future by preparing and focusing. There are those who have and those who will. 🦅

Lt. Alden flies with VFA-87.